Cats

By Mildred Cram
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AFTER dinner, Mrs. Kendrick's guests went outside. There were comfortable wicker chairs on the terrace and the night was warm and calm, very dark.

They sat with their backs to the lighted windows—Mrs. Kendrick, the Australian, Fellowes, Miss Beresford, and one or two others. Mowat thought they were not the sort of people Mrs. Kendrick usually invited to Fieldton. They hadn't the thrust she liked. Dinner had been a polite game of subterfuges, with every one's attention focused on young Jarvis and Vera Hazelton. And now the two had wandered off to the library, where young Jarvis was playing waltzes on Mrs. Kendrick's grand.

"He doesn't like us," Miss Beresford remarked.

"Who?"

"That infatuated and blinded young Jarvis."

"Oh, he doesn't like any one when there's a piano about!"

"Or Miss Hazelton."

"My dear, aren't you rather severe?"

"I was thinking of Chan Stuart," Miss Bereford said.

There was a little stir and Fellowes, tossing his cigarette away, asked uneasily:

"What's become of Chan? No one seems to know."

"I know," Mowat answered, and was instantly sorry that he had spoken.

Mrs. Kendrick leaned forward and he saw her face in the light from the open window.

"You know?" she asked. "You—Mowat? You know where Chan Stuart is, and you haven't told us?"

"It isn't a nice story."

"Is that why you——"

"Not entirely."

"Were you afraid to tell Vera Hazelton?"

"Good Lord, no!"

Mowat lifted his hand.

"What's young Jarvis playing?"

"'Liebesfreud,'" Mrs. Kendrick said. "But you can't put us off, Mowat. Not now! We all knew Chan Stuart. And some of us loved him. I dare say none of us are cowards. I dare say it won't matter how unpleasant——"

Mowat thought: "I see now why she asked these particular people. And Vera and that young Jarvis." Aloud he said:

"It isn't much to tell. Not the last of it. What you want to know, I mean. I'll have to go back to the beginning and make you see him as he was. It will take some time."

"Oh, I'll guarantee Vera's absence," Mrs. Kendrick said, "for as long as you please. Jarvis is playing 'Tristan' now."

"Then I'll tell you at once. Chan is dead."

Mrs. Kendrick covered her eyes with her hands. There was a silence, broken by the subdued murmur of the fountain and that fainting music coming through the library windows and seeming to wander away from them down the terraces to the grove.

Suddenly Fellowes asked:

"Why haven't you told the press? After all, Stuart was one of the most conspicuous men in England. There's been enough of a mystery, as it is."

"You aren't protecting his family, are you?" Miss Beresford demanded, a sharp note in her voice.

"Hardly! I don't like Lady Fullerton; and I don't believe she cares a tinker's cuss—begging you pardon—what became of Chan. He was her son, but he was no longer of any particular use to her."

"I guess you'll have to tell us everything," Fellowes said.

"Now that I've started, I probably shall! It rests with all of you, whether or not the public need know about Chan Stuart's death. The reasons for it are so damnably peculiar."

Mrs. Kendrick lifted her head.

"It will be our duty to tell," she said, "if we can save Chan's face."

"I'm not sure that we can."

Miss Beresford leaned forward.

"You've been out of England, Mr. Mowat. Perhaps you don't know just how bad it is—for Chan. He was on the crest of the wave, racing toward fame and fortune, like a surf-rider in Hawaii; there was something godlike and boisterous and buoyant about his luck. Not about Chan. He was always shy and elusive, just beyond reach. But life seemd to buoy him up and make him conspicuous. Then Vera Hazelton jilted him and he went to pieces—morally, mentally, physically—in six short months. The crest of the wave passed on and Chan was head over heels in the welter, half-drowned. When he disappeared, some of us drew a sigh of relief—Lady Fullerton most of all. That's the gist of it."

"Thank you," Mowat said gravely. "I know all that. I know a good deal about Chan, first and last."

Mowat lighted a cigarette with somewhat ostentatious deliberation. In the house a servant switched off the electricity and the group on the terrace disappeared. There remained only the circular, scarlet glow of several cigarettes to show Mowat his audience.

"It began," he said presently, "when Chan was a baby. The Stuarts were neighbors of ours and I saw a good deal of them. I remember Chan at six, a dark, thin little chap, very imaginative and queer. Yes, I think you would have called him queer, even then. He hadn't the ghost of a chance to be anything else!

"Lady Fullerton—she was Mrs. Stuart, then—was the 'reigning beauty' of the county. She is gorgeous enough now, at fifty-six; but imagine her at twenty-five! One of those Titian glories you read about, but never see. She was real, mind you! Her hair was copper-hued and very thick, lustrous and vital as if each seperate hair were a metal strand charged with electricty. She had white skin and green eyes—moonstone eyes with a diagonal streak across the pupils. You've seen cats with that look of not seeing—inscrutable and disconcerting.

"I was only a youngster myself, nineteen or thereabouts, but I remember Mrs. Stuart's peculiar reputation. She was supposed to be an unfailing siren, to lure men without trying and to cast them off without caring.

"Chan grew up in an atmosphere of excitement and intrigue. He was conscious of his mother's peculiar sort of bait, and how she made use of it, before he was out of his swaddling clothes. The house was forever cluttered with men who were about to fall in love with Mrs. Stuart or were actually in love with her or had been in love with her.

"If Chan had been a normal little boy he would have fattened on the sweets they brought him and laughed up his sleeve. But Chan wasn't normal. He had some of his consumptive father's melancholy, the curse of a predestined, tragic finale, a hunger for love which came straight from his mother and did him no good. For Mrs. Stuart wasn't the loving sort. She lived on the love of others, demanded it, soaked in it, fed on it. Love semed to pass through her like water through a sieve.

"Chan naturally fell into the uni-

versal attitude. Since it was the proper thing to adore his mother, he adored her, too. His wasn't the Lord Fauntleroy sort of adoration. He didn't say 'little mumsie' and kiss her hand. The boy Chan went about his business gravely—he rode his father's horses and played cricket and got into trouble now and then. But that queer inner self of his was Mrs. Stuart's wholly. He lived for a smile, a casual word of praise; he loved her beyond reason.

"When Captain Stuart died, it was worse. Chan didn't leave his mother's side during the period of mourning and seclusion. Admirers were debarred, of course. So poor little Chan went off to Europe with his mother, quite at her mercy. She knew how to be picturesque; she knew how to dazzle. She had no scruples and, what is worse, no sense of humor. She filled Chan's mind with nonsense—the hard, bright sophistication of her kind. She took him into her confidence, and before he was twelve, he had the technique of fashionable immorality at his finger tips. If Chan hadn't been a dreamer, he would have been a bounder. As it was, he glorified her. He thought her clever, deep, and *sans reproche*. Yes, really! And all the time she was *la belle dame sans merci*, passionless and stupid!

"When Chan was fourteen, she came back to England, and packed him off to school. I remember Chan's coming to me the day before his exile, to pour out his grief and his bewilderment. It was a warm autumn, the air was full of smoke haze from many small brush fires in the park, the sky cloudless, the gardens still ahum with bees. We walked for a long time in silence, Chan with bent head, flourishing a stick and making savage sweeps with it at the hedges. Very grown up, very stiff. But finally he burst out:

"'I say, Mowat. You'll watch out for mother when I'm gone, won't you? She's not very strong.'

"Strong! Why, the woman could ride all day and come in looking as unruffled as the first daisy! She hadn't a nerve in her flexible, white body!"

"'I want you to promise,' Chan said, his lips trembling, his eyes very steady and somber. 'I'm going to suffer like the—like the devil, away from her!'

"I promised. And Chan went off to school with his heart breaking. All that hunger for love, that unlimited capacity for loving, was centered on Vivian Stuart. Dangerous. Terrible. I dare say he cried himself to sleep every night, with his head under the pillow to hide his weakness from dormitory wits. He kept her picture in the back of his watch. He wrote her long, sentimental, scrawly letters which she never read. She was too much the famous beauty to be interested in the fag system, for instance! She used to tear her photographs out of the illustrated weeklies, where she appeared facing the queen or the prime minister, and send them to Chan in place of the letters he craved."

Mowat paused. Young Jarvis had wandered away from "Tristan" and was singing "Manon" in an agreeable tenor voice.

"Go on," Mrs. Kendrick said sharply.

"I admit I'm taking an unconscionable time about it," Mowat began again. "You'll have to let me take my pace."

"By all means. Only remember, we don't know——"

"I'm coming to that. But you spoke of saving Chan's face. If I should tell you the bald facts of his unsavory, his abominable death, you'd despise him. I just happened to stumble across the ultimate tragedy. I see the whole thing—clearly—as perhaps you don't. And these first facts of Chan's emotional life are the first steps to complete understanding of him. That is, if you care enough to understand."

"Don't quibble, Mowat," Fellowes interrupted.

Mowat laughed shortly.

"You're pretty much at my mercy, all of you! You see, I'm the only living being who knows what became of Chan Stuart, if you count out the Florida conch who helped me bury him. And I don't intend that you shall look into the grave, at that beautiful face so blackened by rumor, until I've made you see how he got there.

"I'll go back, first, to Vivian Stuart. Lord Fullerton was on the scene all during Chan's schooling. In that queer, strangled way of his, Chan knew and was fiercely jealous. He had imagined, I suppose, that he was going to be his mother's guardian and beautiful knight all the rest of life. She was his, and this Fullerton a rival. You'll admit that Chan's state of mind was unhealthy. If Vivian Stuart had been anything but a silly egotist, she could have put a stop to it. But she rather enjoyed the boy's suffering. Wasn't it another feather in her cap? Another victim? Another slave to the mystery of her cat's eyes and her strange hair, so alive, so vibrant, so devilishly alluring? Unpleasant? The whole thing was unpleasant.

"She married Fullerton without so much as an 'if you please' when Chan was sixteen. Wired him from Paris that she was Lady Fullerton and did he wish her happiness? Well, he did. That was his saving grace! He put his personal grief down out of sight and, happening at that time to run across Sir Isaac West, he transferred his capacity for loving to a new passion, a safer one—research. I can't say what sort of livid scar Vivian Stuart had left upon her son's spirit. I can only imagine. He had been cheated of love; it was, in a way, a betrayal.

"During the years at Oxford, I don't believe he saw his mother more than once or twice. She was in London, dazzling Fullerton's set, getting herself talked about, being photographed by Hoppé, à la Burne-Jones, à la Titian, à la anything you please; being painted by Sargent—and gloriously satirized as a great, glowing cat—Medusa, crouched for prey; you probably remember that figure. Lady Fullerton didn't 'get' it, but Chan may have. He was growing up to be a remarkably handsome, taciturn, deeply sensitive fellow, with a flair for science that got him talked about before his college days were over. Do any of you recall him then? His lean, brown face with that look of perpetual seeking, a sort of hunger, a hidden appetite?"

"Don't exaggerate, Mowat!"

"I'm giving you facts, not theories! God knows, Chan was unconscious of all this! He worked like a Trojan; he was uncommonly ambitious, brilliant, even spectacular. When he left Oxford and stepped into the world to fight his personal battles, he was already well-known. As you said a moment ago, Miss Beresford, life seemed to buoy Chan up. Lady Fullerton became conscious of him again, because he was a fire before which she could warm herself. But Chan fought shy of her and went out to British Guiana for two years. It was easier to solve the mysteries of the impenetrable jungle than to penetrate the empty mazes of that woman's mind. Besides, Chan was still jealous of Fullerton, who had cheated him of his lady. You see, a knight without a gauge.

"When Chan came back he met Vera Hazelton."

Fellowes interrupted.

"Another cat! I see. Hard luck!"

"Destiny, rather. It was written that Chan Stuart should go down before an inscrutable pair of eyes, believing that behind them lay the secret of happiness! The paradox is fascinating. A scientific genius baffled by stupidity, destroyed by it, when the secrets of light and space, atom and infinite, were food for his curiosity.

"He met her at his mother's house,

at a dinner party given in honor of his return 'with the sheaves,' as it were. Sir Isaac West was there, of course. A handful of lesser lights. And Vera Hazelton. I shall never forget that meeting. Lady Fullerton had set out to dazzle her son, fresh from the wilderness, with all the beauty and wit she had at her command. The table was aglitter with colored glass, flowers, candles, to delight his senses, starved for such things.

"When Chan saw his mother, dressed in black, with a band of cut jet around that flaming head of hers, the old pain and worship came into his eyes. He paid no attention to Vera Hazelton, who sat at his right, until the very end of the dinner. I believe she spoke to him, drawing his glance around to her with a deliberate question. And he found himself staring into another pair of moonstone eyes, inscrutable and strange. You will admit the strangeness. Young Jarvis has been fooled by it, perhaps."

Mowat paused, and they all listened, leaning a little forward in the darkness. De Grieux's plaint floated back to them from the library—*le rêve,* passionate and pleading. Mrs. Kendrick said softly:

"Ah, well, Mowat, Chan could have been no worse for an illusion."

"It wasn't an illusion with Chan. It was a belief that here he had found the lady of ladies. He stared at her in the light of the candles, amazed by the purity of her skin, her dark brows, the way her hair swept back from her forehead like metal fine spun and charged with devilish fire. At that moment his mother lost him. He did not stay with Sir Isaac and the other men after dinner, but followed Vera Hazelton to the terrace, where there was moonlight. Oh, the stage setting was perfect! And poor old Chan, completely at the mercy of those unreadable eyes, gave himself to another passion.

"When they came into the drawing-room Lady Fullerton and Vera exchanged glances—it must have been the first time that a genuine expression ever flashed into their eyes; but there was triumph in Vera's look and hate in Lady Fullerton's. Then the mask fell again and they smiled at each other. Chan, of course, was supremely unconscious. He lighted a match for Vera's cigarette and, as he bent over her, you saw in his face how complete his dedication was. Hard luck? Well, rather! Here was the second woman who wanted his admiration and would give him nothing in return for it, neither love nor understanding. And yet she had all the feline graces—she could pur with the best of them!

"That night Chan said to me: 'By Jove! She's *glorious!* Do you suppose a duffer like me has half a chance?'

" 'No,' I retorted. 'Not even a duffer like you.'

" 'You're being enigmatic,' he said.

" 'I only mean that I'd rather see you pursuing butterflies in the Sahara than passion in a spiritual wilderness.'

"Chan laughed. He was in no mood to be frightened. Not long after, I heard that Vera Hazelton had visited his laboratories and had professed herself well pleased—as I suppose she is professing herself well pleased at this moment, with whatever young Jarvis is offering her."

"It's Debussy, now," Mrs. Kendrick said. "But go on."

"Where was I? There isn't so much more to tell. I've shown you what it was that made people call Chan 'queer.' Perhaps you will understand the violence of his reaction from his mother to this girl. That winter he followd her to Italy and she led him a pretty dance, from Rome to Cairo, before she agreed to marry him. He came back to London with her promise, exalted, beside himself. And she went on to Greece, to get rid of him, probably. He must have been an exhausting lover. Any

other sort of woman would have married him at once and spent the rest of her life adoring him—waving her handkerchief from the tower while he went forth to the joust with science. But Vera Hazelton preferred to pat and paw and worry her mouse."

"How unpleasant you are!" Miss Beresford said.

Mowat paid no attention.

"In the end," he went on, "she jilted him. None of us will ever know why. He was on the crest of success; he adored her. Perhaps she was afraid of him. She had no secret, and she knew it. She was only graceful and indifferent and beautifully cruel. Chan came to my rooms after that last interview with her, and at first I thought he was raving drunk. But it was the madness of grief. He wept and moaned; lay on my bed with his arms over his face, choking, refusing to say anything, physically sick. Oh, it was ugly; the sort of thing you can't talk about! It was as if the inner man had disintegrated, gone rotten with despair. He thought the lack was in him, that *he* was unworthy!

"You all remember the scandal that followed—how poor old Chan fell from grace. Like so many disillusioned men, he tried to avenge himself by outraging society's finer sensibilities, and was ignored for his pains. Right in the middle of it, Vera Hazelton announced her engagement to Jarvis, and Chan disappeared. Lady Fullerton, tragically picturesque in Lucille mourning, hinted at suicide. For her, he was dead, or at least, she hoped so.

"The newspapers printed various reports. He had wrecked his laboratory; that much was sure. For the rest, they declared the mangled body of a man found on the tracks just outside of St. Pancras to be Chan. He also figured as having leaped overboard from a Channel steamer. They couldn't manage a respectable death for him, because there is something about a broken heart not quite respectable. Besides, Chan had committed the unpardonable sin—he had repudiated science, the mainstay of man's belief in himself, and had shown himself indifferent to fame, had flung his reputation into the face of the public, and had disappeared, at thirty.

"'Chan was so *mysterious,*' Lady Fullerton said to me fretfully. 'I did my best. He had everything. But he always seemed to be *blaming* me for something.'

"'Perhaps you didn't love him enough,' I suggested.

"She lifted her beautiful brows. 'He wouldn't let me,' she answered.

"So, you see, she had her own grievance. I was about to leave England for the States and her parting admonition was: 'Watch out for Chan over there. All social fugitives go to Texas or California, you know. Only don't let him come back to England—he's quite *finished* here.'

"I kept my eyes open for Chan everywhere I went. I searched the crowds of New York, Chicago, New Orleans, and the coast cities for that dark, ardent face, that lean and distinguished body. I looked for him in the northwest, in Wyoming, along the border. And strangely enough, considering the vast multitude I was combing, I found him."

"Where?" Mrs. Kendrick asked.

"In Florida. I had come from Galveston to Key West and was waiting there for an American destroyer whose commander had promised to mix me a certain famous Key West cocktail, on its native soil, as it were. While I waited, I explored the Keys—those turtle-backed sand islands linking the city to the mainland. It's fascinating country. A fisherman's paradise. Some of the islands are inhabited by the so-called Florida 'conch,' and one of these men I hired to show me about. He had a motor boat and an inexhaustible knowledge of the Florida Keys. We

nosed in and out of the shallows. Now and again we made landings on slivers of blazing sand. And it was one of these chance landings that brought me to Chan.

"We had gone ashore for water at a little settlement of rude shanties. Some barefooted children and slatternly women and an old conch ran out to meet us, eying us with shy curiosity. While my guide filled the water tank, I photographed the sunburned group. The younger men had gone to Key West, but the old fellow showed us around.

"'English, ain't you?' he asked. 'There's another Englishman over yonder.' He pointed with his thumb. 'Lives alone, where you see the shanty —'bout two miles to the no'th. Been there more'n a year, now.'

"'A fisherman?' I asked.

"'No.' The old fellow squinted and spat. 'Not exactly. He's queer.'

"I thought at once, unreasonably, of Chan.

"'Do you know his name?' I asked.

"'No. He don't talk. Not to folks, anyway. He's got a gun. Fishes some.' The conch paused and glanced quickly at me. 'Reckon he don't want to see *you!*'

"Here was mystery. I asked casually: 'Lives there all alone, does he?'

"'Yessir. Queer. Damn queer! He's got a cat—big red critter with green eyes. Him and that cat—alone, out there! By damn, what do you make of it?'

"I made of it with a sinking heart, but I said nothing except that I'd go over and see the Englishman. That piscatorial factotum of mine didn't want to go. He had been told strange stories about the lonely settler and his cat—would-be visitors had been fired at; passing boats had heard weird cries in the night. Nonsense, all of it! I said I'd go alone. But my guide wouldn't risk his boat in those treacherous shallows, but agreed to put me ashore at the Englishman's landing for a consideration of five dollars. I would gladly have given him five pounds! The swaggering buccaneer, scenting adventure, came, too, and we turned the launch toward a flake of silver, across water dazzlingly blue and polished as enamel. I knew, before I set foot on Chan's refuge, that he would be there, and I shuddered at the thought of what I might find—a dirty, unshaven, vacant-eyed man and a tortoise-shell cat, an inscrutable, selfish, graceful creature with moonstone eyes."

Mrs. Kendrick shuddered.

"Disgusting," she whispered. "You imagine——"

"Perhaps. I could fancy him offering her bits of fish, caressing her as she purred on his knee, watching her sudden gusts of playfulness and anger, worshiping her, afraid of her, dedicated to her —mad, mad, *mad!*

"There was no sign of any one on the island or Key. A single, ragged coconut palm stood by the shanty. A boat was tethered at the landing. All about, the sea lay unbroken, mirroring the compact blue of the sky. We went ashore and called. No answer.

"Stumbling away from the shack, we came on Chan, down near the water, on the other side of the island. He lay on his face across a little mound. And he had shot himself through the heart. When we turned him over we found that he had fallen on the shallow, partially covered grave of an ordinary, jade-eyed tortoise-shell cat."

There was a little flurry; a laugh. Vera Hazelton stood in the lighted doorway.

"What on earth are you talking about?" she demanded. And young Jarvis, peering over her shoulder, blinked into the shadows.

"Cats," Mowat said briefly.

"Nonsense!" Vera laughed again. "Why do you sit in the dark? Has any one a cigarette?"